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Ersatz

George M. Horton Jr.
West Virginia University

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Ersatz

George M. Horton Jr

A thesis submitted to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Painting

Paul Krainak, M.F.A. , Chair
Kristina Olson
Bill Thomas

Morgantown, West Virginia
2003

Keywords: Painting, Minimalism, Perception, Phenomenology

Abstract

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My work attempts to develop the relationship between optical and formal painting traditions in modernism via the literal surface of the painting and the object or objects represented. The paintings are arranged to create an effect of simultaneous emergence and dissolution. They represent the falsely temporal aspects of the perceived world, the concretization of which only exists in the mind of the viewer. This thesis statement will address issues of surface and illusionism in modern pictorial theory and the importance of perception verses objectification. In addition I will discuss the subject matter, composition, and techniques employed to create the works. I will also address the influences of artists and writers that deal with similar aesthetics or themes.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents, George M. Horton Sr., and Claudia Horton, for their unconditional support. Thank you to my graduate committee, Kristina Olson, Bill Thomas, and especially Paul Krainak for their constant support, advice, patience, and faith, while pursuing my M.F.A. degree in painting. Your guidance is greatly appreciated.

Introduction

Essentially, the paintings in my Master of Fine Arts Thesis exhibit are a critique of modernist painting. I use a painter's vernacular to address issues that matured in the Modern era and continue in contemporary painting. More specifically, the work deals with the relationship between surface and illusion, or more broadly, fact and fiction. I am concerned with the historical and social importance placed on the interest. I am not at all interested in depicting an objectified, observable reality. I am, however, interested in the *perception* of an objectified, observable reality. In the present works, I develop conceptual discrepancies relationships between the literal surface of the painting, and the object or objects represented. The images are arranged to create an effect of simultaneous emergence and dissolution, each in part being subverted by the other. They represent the false aspects of perceived space and surface of painting and, in a broad context, that of the perceived world. The work is

poised as a critique of painting and the issues of facture¹
verses picture and/or painting as window verses painting as
object.

¹ **facture**- the process of working on the medium with certain tools, or evidence of how something is crafted.

Subject Matter

The perception of space has been an ongoing theme in the works I have created since my admittance into the graduate program at West Virginia University. In the beginning, my efforts were directed toward the distortion of space through reflective surfaces. These early efforts were restricted to a traditional interpretation of representing a technical effect. Owing largely to a greater exposure to modern and contemporary art, the dogmatic adherence to a ritualized approach to painting gave way to a more free-form expressiveness in my work and an exploration of late modern pictorial theory.

At the beginning, my paintings focused almost exclusively on still-life objects. In particular, those found in and around my studio space, or at my home. While still not straying far from my surroundings, I became interested in the repetition of architectural spaces and the ability to use one-point perspective to my advantage. Therefore, I chose objects that could be spatially defined by their architectural or linear formal aspects. Secondly, I choose forms with a high degree of familiarity in common

culture. The industrialized forms of repeated slats or corrugated steel are present in all social levels of American society. The naturalistic depth required by the painting to entice the viewer to concretize the image must be based on his/or her ability to recognize it as a solid object.

This allowed me to work both minimally (using an objects inherent industrial coloring and repetition) and with varying degrees of naturalistic depth (using the distance between the painted slats or the linear perspective provided by the slat form).

As noted above, the majority of the objects I choose are either entirely colorless (in the sense that white and black, and gray are not colors), or the color is highly subdued. This is intended to decrease the recognition of the particular in a work. I emphasize a lack of specific, temporal existence.² The subdued coloring of the objects allows for a greater focus on the structure of the image. The colors are not a product of objectified rendering (i.e., the source material may have been brightly colored, though now depicted in grays, whites, blacks, and other subdued tones). They are the product of editing the

² Bright color is an identifying trait. It confines an object or space to a specific environment or experience.

particular, unique aspects out of the appropriated late modernist composition.



In *Ten Main Rags*, 2003, the structure of the slat form is immediately recognized by the viewer. However, this image is subverted by the contradictory "surface" texture of the painting. While the slat forms run horizontally across the painting surface, the texture runs vertically, both reaffirming the flatness of the canvas, and subverting the illusionistic image of slat forms.

Composition and Technique

Although systematic, the methods for depicting the spaces are not entirely based on formulae. I use a wide range of techniques and compositional formats depending on the inherent structure of the object represented, or the degree of obscurity or familiarity I want to emphasize.

I begin each work with priming the canvas. I also add to the surface an impasto layer of gesso to create a texture that may enhance and/or subvert the structure that is later to be clarified.

I then begin to depict the image, either in pencil, paint, or, at times, masking tape. In the first paint layer, my concern is recognizable structure and color resonation. Although it is applied on top of the texture, the second part of the process is employed to "push" the image behind the surface of the painting. The effect is that the texture appears to lie on top of the represented image. This is intended to subvert the technique involved in the textural layer, confusing the evident facture and the illusionistic polish. I use a brush technique to submerge the image to the back of the surface texture,

which decreases its detail, and emphasizes different degrees of visual obscurity.



In the detail of *Ten Main Rags* (left), the surface becomes the emphasis and the slat forms seem to lie beneath the texture. However, this is not the case. The

paintings disguise their own making.

This act of brushing or "blurring" the image is also a process of editing out extraneous detail. I obtained great control of this technique in the "Black" series of my fourth semester. This technique, when paired with others, increases the ambiguity of the object and its spatial relationship to the viewer. I use these obscuring techniques to different degrees as I do not desire to have the same amount of ambiguity in each work. The recognition of the form, and its relationship to the viewer is not constant in each painting.

By obscuring the surface/image relationship, the would-be direct interpretation of the image portrayed is subverted by the contradictory evidence of its making. This is articulated to its highest degree in the *after all*



s(a)nk, 2003, (below). The extreme relationship in the painted slats placed in perspective and the slats created by the texture simultaneously notes the importance of the illusionistic image and the importance of the painting as object. It is both an extension of Minimalism and its indispensable "art as object" theory, and a critique of its dogma.

While making use of a more directly recognizable



Minimalist structure (the grid) the unstretched pieces on the back wall, 2003, (above) of the gallery both reference the structure of the gallery itself, and imbue the minimal aesthetic with a suggestion of theatrics. Here the architectural reference becomes literal, while the images inside the installation challenge the flatness of the canvases, the structure of the gallery wall, and the rigidity of the grid.

Influential Writings and Artists

Albert Einstein's published works on the *Special and General Theories of Relativity* plays a significant role in my concept of space, time, and pictorial representation. His theories are founded on the idea that time and space are not separated, and that the speed of light is the only universal constant. As his theories originally dealt more with debates on the nature of time, its linear perception, and non-linear reality, they later began to encapsulate the way that space is perceived by humans, as opposed to its "true" relative aspects. The onslaught of relativity brought into question the "truth" of Euclidean geometry, and even perspective space. I cannot overstate the importance of this theory on the way that I process visual information. Einstein's theory dictates that individual perception shapes and dictates "reality". That whatever we perceive to be true, is Truth.

These same ideas are included in Art and Physics³ by Leonard Shlain. His book is an attempt to draw relationships between artistically depicted space and the prevalent theories of physics at the time the works were

³ Leonard Shlain, Art and Physics, New York: Marrow, 1991.

created. Although I do not agree totally with its thesis, the text had much to offer in the way physics influences pictorial representation. Beginning with classical artworks, Shlain walks through various time periods of art and physics citing ties that bind the two otherwise disparate methods of representing reality.

Most influential for me, is his belief that visual art pre-dated physics in its rejection of perspectival space. He argues that before Einstein, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, with the development of Cubism, led the world to a different conception of space/time. It is the questioning of linear perspective or "naturalized" space that plays a part in my work. I am not concerned with objects adhering to the specifics of linear perspective. Rather, I engage some of its aspects to imply space. Oftentimes, upon close inspection there can be seen inconsistencies in the linear perspective. This, I use to negate the "perceived reality" of this dogmatic logical approach to spatial depiction.

Shlain states,

There remains in art and psychology circles a lively debate as to whether the world is actually in perspective or whether we learn to see it in this particular way. But the very acknowledgement that not everyone can 'see' perspective casts doubt upon the 'truth' of our belief in Euclidean space

as the only imaginable one.⁴

Again, the idea that "reality" lies not in one's objectified world, or learned mental constructs, but in one's perception of reality directly relates to the body of work I am currently producing.

Various phenomenologists deserve note in the development of my work. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas of the body and mind correlation are similar to my questioning of the surface and illusion correlation. The concept that the physical body and "mind" are not separable entities but a whole relates directly to my interpretation of fracture and illusionism, object and window. Jean Baudrillard's ideas of a synthetic cultural development⁵, and the idea that perception makes truth are seeds from which the present body of work grew.

Several artists have influenced my work visually and stylistically. Robert Motherwell, while I appreciate, and even venerate his paintings and works on paper, has had a more powerful affect on me in terms of theory. His ideas of subtlety and non-theatric works has imbued in me a sense of the sublime as a greater communicator than the ostentatiousness of some contemporary expressionism.

⁴ Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics*, New York: Marrow, 1991, 152.

⁵ Baudrillard believed that the modern culture is perpetuated and even dictated by synthetic materials: signs, advertisements, commercially produced objects, etc.

Motherwell's subdued work opened the door for my appreciation of Minimalist art, the implications of which have been previously discussed. Motherwell's statement that, "Great art is never extreme...."⁶ resonates loudly in my work. My paintings are anything but extreme. He further states, "What does matter is to be complete and to be sufficiently subtle...no truth is true that is not subtle".⁷ My works, like the statement here, are an attempt at representing truth through subtlety. They are lacking in pretension and ego. They are an attempt at communicating in as precise and complete a manner as possible.

There are an innumerable amount of artists who have influenced my current aesthetic. The most notable of these are Gerhard Richter, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, Kevin Zucker, and Toba Khedoori. Each of these artists has influenced my work drastically either in technique, aesthetic, or ideology, and, at times, all three. In each of these artists, facture, surface, and aesthetic are equally considered and inform the reading of the works, oftentimes to different ends.

⁶ Robert Motherwell, Collected Writings, (California: University of California Press, 1992), 28.

⁷ Ibid, 100.

When I first began looking at the work of Gerhard Richter, I was immediately attracted to his black monochromatic series. In particular, the late 1980's series dealing with historical German figures and their relationship to death, the danger of ideology, and loss.

In paintings like "Cell", created in 1988, Richter expresses themes of loss and death. The greatest influence on my work is the visual obscurity that he uses to convey a

message that is political and historic.

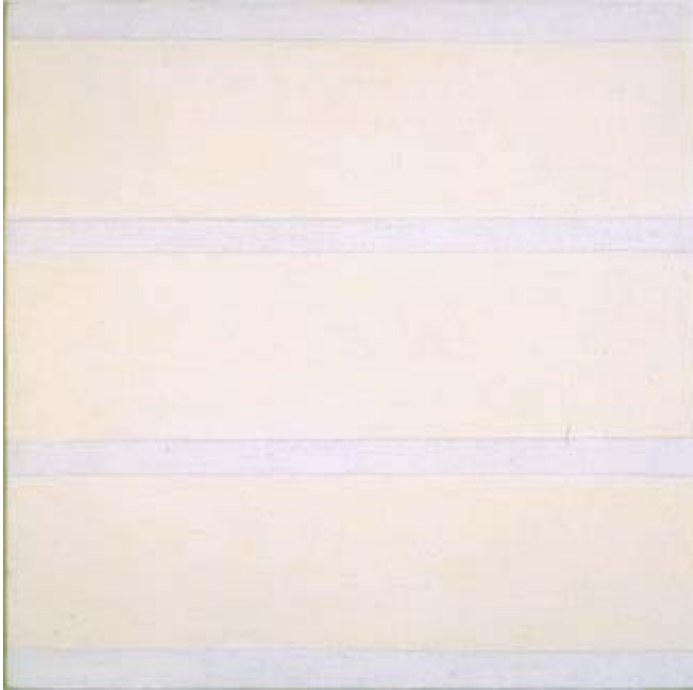


In Richter's own words, he states that the paintings have "...the same blurred look, whereby something has to be shown and simultaneously not shown, in order perhaps to say something else again, a third thing".⁸ It is in this use of obscurity that I find

commonality. Also, his use of dramatic monochrome to convey the severity of the image interests me. He has depicted an image so dramatic and obscure, that without title or context, one would still be

⁸ Gerhard Richter, The Daily Practice of Painting, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 1992, 226.

capable of understanding the intense emotions present in the work.



On quite a different level , the work of Agnes Martin has also influenced my aesthetic greatly. Her subdued tonalities and controlled line are things that I wish to emulate in my own work.

Furthermore, her work pertains to a reality that is experienced rather than objectively logical. She states, "Happiness is unattached. Always the same. It does not appear or disappear. It is not sometimes more and sometimes less. It is our awareness of happiness that goes up and down. Happiness is our real condition. It is reality. It is life."⁹

Her recognition of an outer reality and our perception being the dictating factor falls in line with my own beliefs of life and art. The most attractive thing about

⁹ Agnes Martin, Writings, Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1992, 135.

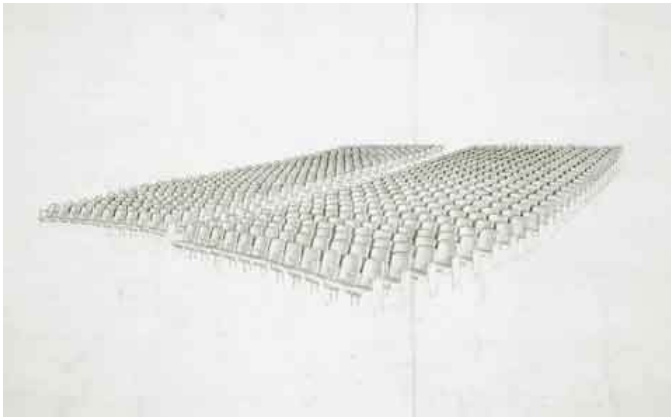
Martin's work, as compared to my own, is not in its emotive content. Instead, I find great familiarity with her subtlety and control. Her work is the embodiment of the expression of subtle truth.

Most recently, I have been influenced by the works of two relatively new artists, Kevin Zucker and Toba Khedoori. Both of these artists work with interior and exterior inhabitable spaces, while the spaces themselves remain empty of a physical presence. In the work of Kevin Zucker, find community with the



starkness of his images. Also, even though the pictures indicate spaces that are livable, the severity of the line, the flat, bland use of color, and the obvious remnants of human presence, make the otherwise invitational scenes not

enticing to the viewer. His use of a somewhat harsh linear perspective increases the unattractiveness of the spaces he creates. The images, although compositionally open to viewer involvement, speak of an estrangement of the viewer to the highly manufactured industrialized space. The absence of the human is reflected in the lack of desire to enter the pictorial space, as much as the lack of figurative element in the work itself.

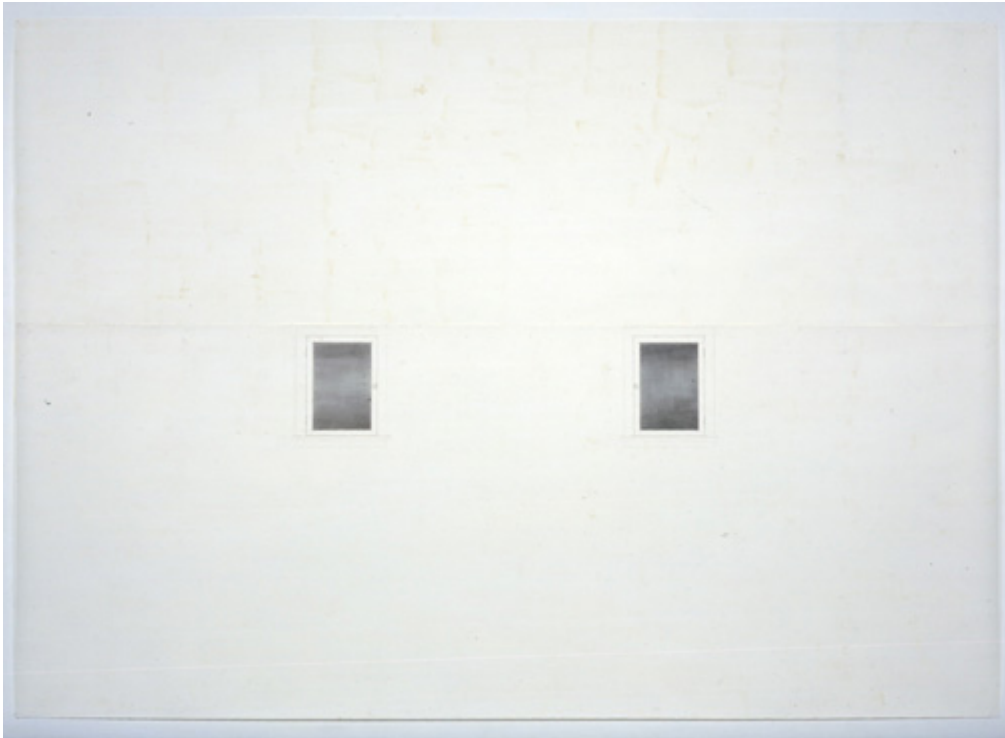


Toba Khedoori's

works also forbid entrance to the viewer by emphasizing the abstract qualities of the surface and object in a seemingly

illusionistic image. Her methodology is different than that of Zucker. Khedoori's interiors are created using oil and wax on paper, with the steady and precise hand of a draftsman. It is in the work of Khedoori that I began to see surface as an important player in my aesthetic. However literal her images may seem, they refute viewer entrance in the somewhat skewed perspective and large flat field in which they are depicted. The catalogue for her works at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles states,

"there seems to be no readily identifiable whole, no former context in which we might envisage their original state or future restoration"¹⁰. Her works have been described as simultaneously tangible and fleeting.¹¹ Her paintings, in size and structure go beyond a rather diagrammatic depiction and exist in no



specific time or space. Anthony Vidler writes, "[Khedoori's works] seem to fail as symbols by the fact of their total alienation from ideal worlds, past, present, and future; they fail as allegories by their stubborn

¹⁰ Anthony Vidler, "Home Pages, notes on the work of Toba Khedoori", Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997, 19.

¹¹ Elizabeth A. T. Smith, "Vertigo", Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997, 4.

resistance to history and temporality."¹² It is this refusal of the temporal aspects of the objects depicted, as well as the overall subdued tone and great expanse of the work that has had the greatest impact on my current work.

¹² Anthony Vidler, "Home Pages, notes on the work of Toba Khedoori", Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997, 19.

Conclusion

The present work is born from an interest in modern pictorial theory, specifically that of the importance of actual surface verses illusionism. The paintings materialize that debate. They present an exploration of both the ideals of traditional and modernist painting, and the questions of objectification. Furthermore, I consider it to be a simultaneous homage and critical assessment of Minimalism, the period of art that dealt with "art as object" most dogmatically.

By simultaneously emphasizing and subverting the texture-image relationship, the work becomes an articulation of the facture verses fiction argument that defines modern pictorial theory. There is not an absolute solution to this historical debate. Instead, the paintings are positioned to raise questions about the importance of art as object and art as illusion.

The role of the observer is vital to the content of the work. The image fluctuates and draws correlations between two different modes of depicting space in the stretched paintings while visually tying the more conceptual unstretched pieces on the back wall to the adjacent walls. Therefore the debate is materialized

through the engagement of works in the gallery architecture, rather than illustrated in an illusionistic painting space.

Although critical of traditional modes of depicting space, the work also carries an homage to its theoretical antecedent, Minimalism. While Minimalism created art that was self defining (i.e. you see what you see), my work partially incorporates the Minimalist aesthetic and stands as a work that is spatially indefinable (i.e. what you see is not exactly what you see). In this way, the work can be interpreted as an appraisal of Minimalism and a pun on its defining characteristic.

The paintings in my Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibit are amorphous. It is in the nebulae of covert processes and spatial renderings that the work begins to articulate the inarticulate, materialize the immaterial, and define the indefinable. Illusion or fact, painting as object or painting as window, facture or fiction...the paintings are both and simultaneously neither. The work creates a bridge. It critically assesses the situation and pays homage to both sides of the debate.

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"Recent Paintings by Rocky Horton and John
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1997 "Iconographia", School of Fine Art, Harding
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SKILLS

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RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE

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1999-2000 NASBA, Engineering Examination Services,
 Nashville, TN

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SPECIAL INTRESTS

Music (composing/performing) , Athletics
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